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POLICY ISSUES

THE ENVIRONMENTAL SITUATION IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN AND OTHER ARAB TERRITORIES

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present report reviews the implementation of Governing Council decision 17/31, of 21 May 1993, and 18/11, of 26 May 1995, by which the Executive Director was requested, inter alia, to update the report on the state of the environment in the occupied Palestinian and other Arab territories and to provide the necessary technical assistance in Palestinian institutional and self-capacity-building in the field of the environment.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

(a) Welcome the activities which the United Nations Environment Programme is undertaking within the framework of the multilateral working groups of the Middle East peace talks, and request the Executive Director to continue to intensify such support;

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(b) Urge the United Nations Environment Programme to take a prominent role in the activities of the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories in order to ensure that environmental concerns are given due priority in all the cooperative programmes under the jurisdiction of his office; and

(c) Request the Executive Director to undertake, within available resources, activities related to the environmental situation in the occupied Palestinian and other Arab territories in the course of the regular programme of work for 1998-1999.

A. Activities undertaken by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) within the framework of the Middle East multilateral peace process

1. UNEP participates in the activities of the Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources and the Multilateral Working Group on the Environment of the Middle East peace process.

2. Since the last meeting of the Governing Council, the working groups have met twice. The first occasion was 18-22 June 1995, when the meetings of both working groups were clustered into one session, in Amman, Jordan, as an experimental measure and in view of the close interrelationship between water resources and environmental issues.

3. This experiment was judged by the Steering Committee of the Multilateral Talks not to have been a success and, subsequently, the Water Resources Working Group met in Hammamet, Tunisia, from 14 to 16 May 1996, and the Environment Working Group is scheduled to meet in Valencia, Spain, in December 1996.

4. As a result of financial and other constraints, role of UNEP in the peace process has been restricted to providing technical and other advisory services in those programmes of the multilateral working groups where it has been invited to participate as a partner.

5. UNEP held a training course on "Project Design and Appraisal Tools for Integrated Environmental and Economic Assessment" from 4 to 8 December 1995, in Nairobi, Kenya, as part of the water sector regional training programme conducted by the European Union. The training course was attended by 17 participants from the three core parties and from Egypt, Morocco and Oman. Participants requested UNEP to provide more detailed assistance on specific topics in longer workshops, which should be held in the region. A further workshop is being planned for 1997, subject to the availability of resources.

6. UNEP has also provided technical support for the activities of the Norwegian Government in facilitating consensus-building on principles for cooperation among the core parties on water-related matters and new and additional water resources. This initiative began as a comparative study of water laws and water institutions in the Middle East sponsored by the Norwegian Government and is being carried out by the Centre for Environmental Studies and Resource Management (CESAR), Oslo, Norway.

7. UNEP participated in an International Expert Meeting on Water Laws and Water Institutions in the Middle East which took place in Geneva, Switzerland, on 26 and 27 June 1995, organized by CESAR. The Global Resources Information Database (GRID) in Arendal also assisted CESAR in the preparation of a Water Atlas (Water Resources Data for Decision Making in the Middle East, a three-volume, 850 page publication, also available on CD-ROM). The Water Atlas is intended to be a tool for implementing the declaration on principles for cooperation among the core parties on water-related matters and new and additional water resources.

8. Agreement was reached on the declaration in Oslo on 13 February 1996, after two years of intense negotiation. In a ceremony, which took place in Oslo on 12 June 1996 and to which representatives of UNEP were invited, the declaration was made public and an implementation initiative was announced incorporating a "Waternet" - an electronic network connecting public and academic institutions working with water issues in the Middle East. As part of the network, a regional network and research centre is proposed to be established in Amman, Jordan.

9. A further proposal to equip the centre as a UNEPnet Subnet B station with satellite connection to worldwide electronic networking facilities is also under consideration by the core parties.

10. In relation to the Working Group on the Environment, UNEP and the Intergovernmental Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa are cooperating in the Desertification Programme led by the World Bank through the implementation of a project in the Arava Valley.

B. Activities associated with the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO)

11. Following the establishment of an inter-agency consultative mechanism for the improvement of coordination in The United Nations' system support to the peace process in the Middle East, the Office of the Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO) has held three inter-agency meetings.

12. The main task of the first two meetings was to prepare six strategy papers covering education, employment generation, health, infrastructure and housing, institution building and the private sector for the January 1996 Paris Ministerial Conference on Economic Assistance to the Palestinians.

13. UNEP is involved in the health and infrastructure working groups and also gives general advice on environmental aspects of sustainable development.

14. Since the publication of the six United Nations strategy papers, over US$ 110 million has been committed by donors towards United Nations projects.

15. UNSCO is now preparing a similar initiative for 1997 and UNEP has prepared two project proposals for possible financing. One is on training in environmental law and the other is in environmental economics. The proposals for 1997 will be presented to a World Bank consultative meeting in late 1996.

C. The environmental situation

16. With regard to the request to the Executive Director to update the report on the environmental situation in the occupied Palestinian and other Arab territories, contained in decision 18/11 of 26 May 1996, the additional financial resources required to produce this report and to provide technical assistance to the Palestinian National Authority have not yet been obtained.

17. Nevertheless, specific environmental assessment activities were undertaken under the auspices of bilateral projects:

(a) The Gaza Environmental Profile has been completed by the Palestinian National Authority with financial assistance from the Government of the Netherlands. Plans are underway to complete a similar environmental profile of the West Bank, following the establishment of an office of the Environmental Planning Directorate in the West Bank.

(b) The Government of Israel has published a report on regional environmental cooperation and development options, which contains information on many of the major environmental problems facing the Middle East, such as rapid development, population and urban growth; water shortages; desertification; pollution; and the conservation of biological diversity.1/

(c) Since 1994, the Austrian Government Department for Development Cooperation has supported the establishment of an environmental database for the West Bank at the Applied Research Institute, Jerusalem. The implementing agency is the Society for Austro-Arab Relations. The database covers agriculture, water, climate, industry, wastewater and solid waste and are contained in a geographic information system (GIS).

D. Technical assistance in Palestinian institutional and self-capacity-building

18. In view of the lack of additional resources to comply fully with decision 18/11 of the Governing Council and the relevant parts of decision 17/31 of the Governing Council relating to technical assistance, UNEP has concentrated on ensuring that environmental considerations are taken into account in the United Nations system programme of assistance to the Palestinians covered under the UNSCO coordinated activities in the six priority areas mentioned in paragraph 12 above.

1/ Regional Environmental Cooperation and Development Option, Government of Israel, Ministry of the Environment, January 1996.